

# Sweet seduction under the Christmas tree

## Marzipan, a gift from the land of The Thousand And One Nights



**There are any number of sagas and legends about the origin of one of the most popular Christmas bakery items of all times – marzipan. The very mention of its name prompts many of us to close our eyes in delight and wallow in sweet memories.**

Once upon a time ... That's actually the way all tales about fabled marzipan should begin. Because right down to this very day, it is not possible to clearly identify the origin of this legendary delight. One of the most well known stories is set in the Hanseatic city of Lübeck in Germany. Around 1407, the city was beset by famine. In a desperate attempt to stave off death, several bakers transformed the last of their supplies – a few sacks of sugar and almonds – into nutritious breads. The one or the other version of this legend, by the way, is told wherever marzipan is produced on any kind of scale. That's why many cities still vie against one another in claiming that marzipan had been discovered within their ancient walls.

According to another story, Venice was the birthplace of marzipan. Tradition has it that small, delicious breads were

made in honor of Saint Mark. Thanks to Venice's flourishing trade in spices and silks, Saint Mark's Bread, which was also called Marci panis, went on to spread throughout the entire world. The fact is, in any event, that protein-rich almond trees thrive in the Near East, rose water is traded there, and sugarcane, which is native to India, is also cultivated there. So this area offers all of the ingredients needed to make marzipan. Author Thomas Mann wrote about it this way: "A third of this, two-thirds of that, peeled, ground, blended, roasted, shaped – and the confection of the harem was finished."

### The long way to Europe

During the 15th century, marzipan made its way to Spain, and then to Christian Europe with the returning Crusaders. Although this sweet confection soon found enthusiastic devotees here, it long remained the purview of crowned heads and princes. It's possible to get an idea of how preciously this food was valued if we know that Charles IV received marzipan breads covered with gold



leaf upon victoriously entering Siena in the year 1368!

Medicinal properties, too, were attributed to this coveted confection. In many places, recipe books mentioned marzipan as an aphrodisiac, a strength-giving bread or a heart stimulant. It was said that its healing effect could be enhanced by adding crushed gemstones and pearls, as well as thyme or other medicinal herbs. In 1557, the



apothecaries secured the privilege of making marzipan, and thus one of the most lucrative sources of income in those times. That's because unimaginable prices were being paid for sugar, and they weren't able to be lowered until the discovery of America, which opened up new areas for cultivating sugarcane. In fact, the steadily increasing demand for marzipan gave birth to a new vocation in France: The pastry cook. Several of these hard-working "canditors" migrated throughout the world to spread their art of marzipan making at the courts of the nobility. Marzipan had set out to conquer the world.

### Marzipan for the people

The discovery came in the early 19th century: Sugar could also be produced from beets! Costly imported cane sugar could be replaced by domestically produced beet sugar. The common

people could now finally afford this exquisite delicacy. The first marzipan factory, equipped with steam-driven beet presses, almond mills and kneaders, went into production in 1806.

### **The recipe remains a secret**

The once strenuous task of producing the marzipan dough, which necessitates hard physical labor at the grinding stone, has now given way to industrial production. During the Christmas season, the major marzipan producers in Lübeck today employ thousands of people and produce over 30 tons of marzipan a day. Yet in spite of all the modern technology – the recipe for making marzipan remains a secret that is closely guarded by every producer.

A key factor in the quality of the marzipan is the ratio in which the individual ingredients are blended. Buyers of "Lübeck Marzipan," for example, can be sure that their

marzipan wasn't just made in Lübeck, but also satisfies especially high requirements. Because only marzipan that consists of 60% almonds and not more than 40% sugar is allowed to be called "Choice Lübeck Marzipan."

But what is, in fact, the difference between the two most well known varieties: Lübeck and Königsberg marzipan? Königsberg marzipan, which is more heavily seasoned with bitter almonds, is baked (flamed) for several minutes after being shaped, which gives the figurines their typical edges. The roasted substances that are produced in the process additionally lend a special taste to the marzipan. Lübeck marzipan, on the other hand, is very mild, less sweet and snow white in color. Today, companies from Lübeck supply their products to over 40 different lands, including countries in the faraway Orient, where everything once began. So after all these years, marzipan has returned to the place where it was first invented.